



Reviews of Daniel Davis's *Contingent Academic Labor* and Lisa del Rosso's *Confessions of an Accidental Professor*

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Abstract

This review covers Daniel Davis's *Contingent Academic Labor: Evaluating Conditions to Improve Student Outcomes* and Lisa del Rosso's *Confessions of an Accidental Professor*. Davis's book offers a rubric for evaluating the working conditions of contingent academic laborers. del Rosso's *Confessions* is a memoir of her experience as a contingent academic laborer.

Davis, Daniel. *Contingent Academic Labor: Evaluating Conditions to Improve Student Outcomes*. The New Faculty Majority Series, series foreword by Maria Maisto, foreword by Adrianna Kezar, Stylus, 2017.

del Rosso, Lisa. *Confessions of an Accidental Professor*. Serving House Books, 2017.

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The two books under review complement each other well. Daniel Davis's *Student Outcomes* offers a rubric for universities and colleges to measure whether contingent academic laborers are treated equitably or not. Lisa del Rosso's *Confessions of an Accidental Professor* is a memoir that describes the author's experience as a contingent academic laborer in for-profit, private, and public sectors of higher education. Davis presents a largely macro level view of the iniquitous treatment of contingent academic laborers, while del Rosso shares a micro level view of her own lived experience as a contingent academic laborer. Read consecutively, the two books provide a comprehensive understanding of the value of contingent academic labor to higher education and offer a condemnation of the systemic undervaluing of workers central to the lives of undergraduate learners.

Davis's *Contingent Academic Labor*

Davis's concise volume (126 pages) is divided into three parts:

- Part One: Contingent Academic Labor in Broader Contexts
- Part Two: Illustrating the Range of Work Conditions
- Part Three: The Contingent Labor Conditions Score

In the following pages, I will describe each part briefly and then discuss the value of the book.

"Part One: Contingent Academic Labor in Broader Contexts"

Davis opens the book with the research context for understanding the scope of part- and full-time contingency across higher education. He then discusses the "Categories of Contingent Faculty": "Career Enders," which refers to people in semi-retirement; "Specialists" in the field who adjunct in addition to their full-time jobs, "Freelancers" who work part-time to keep their schedule open for other activities; and "Aspiring Academics" who desire a tenure-track position (Gappa and Leslie qtd. in Davis 7-8). Katherine V. Wills provides an excellent critique of the first three types of contingent faculty in "The Lure of 'Easy' Psychic Income." "Psychic income" refers to "the perceived personal, social, and cultural compensation that a job brings to an individual above and beyond wages" (Wills 201). For Wills, the contingent faculty in the first three categories, who work primarily for "psychic income," are a problem because they inadvertently "support managerial and institutional reliance upon and control over other workers who were economically dependent on their wages" (203). Davis notes that "Aspiring Academics," whose academic labor is their main source of income, make up the largest number of contingent faculty (8). He closes Chapter 1 by noting that current discussions of contingency fall into two different frames. Frame A refers to "Contingency as Voluntary, Flexible, and Empowering" (13); it reflects

the situations of careerists, specialists, and freelancers. Frame B, the situation that reflects the *new faculty majority*, describes "Contingency as Exploitation" (13).

As Chapter 2 suggests, contingency exploits both faculty and students because "[f]aculty working conditions are student learning conditions" (Maisto qtd. in Davis xv). Poor working conditions include lack of access to office space, as well as the necessity for some contingent faculty to be "freeway flyers," teaching at multiple institutions at a distance from one another (Davis 13). Contingent faculty are also particularly vulnerable to unfair course evaluations (15). Davis discusses recent research on the long-term effects of faculty working conditions on students. Students taught by contingent faculty without job security or benefits are less likely to remain in a major or stay at their university (Davis 16). Conversely, students at Northwestern University that took classes with contingent faculty who had job security "score[d] higher in subsequent courses in that major than the students who were taught by tenure-track faculty" (16). Davis also reports on the long-term earning potential of students taught by a majority of part-time faculty versus a majority of full-time faculty. Students who are taught by full-time faculty with greater job security earn more in the ten years following graduation (19-21). Davis infers that this greater income reflects the importance of job security (22). Contingent faculty whose jobs are determined by high course evaluations do not have the same academic freedom to challenge students (22).

Chapter 3 reports on an idea that Adrianna Kezar, the author of the foreword to the book, found particularly important: "cooling out' among contingent faculty" (qtd. in Davis xii). Davis takes the idea of "cooling out" from a 1960 article by Burton Clark, a scholar of higher education (Davis 23). Davis finds Clark's work useful for understanding contingency because it "examines the tension between a society that promotes college for all and a career system that sharply rations opportunity" (23). Individuals are given an illusion that education will "ensure a path to middle-class success. But at the same time, many of these graduates are systematically denied access to the career opportunities that would fulfill such promises" (23). In the case of Aspiring Academics who desire a job on the tenure-track, "their ambitions are ... heated up, but then must be cooled out" (23). Provocatively, Davis contextualizes Clark's work on the "cooling out" in an academic setting with the "cooling out" period of a person who has been conned into investing money in a scheme by "confidence (con) artists" (23). In this investment swindle, the con artist tricks "a mark or victim" into investing money; after a series of investments, "[s]uddenly, because of a mistake, the mark's entire investment is lost" (23). To keep the victim from going to the police, someone "cools out" the mark by explaining the "'philosophy of taking a loss'" (Goffman qtd. in Davis 24). Part of this process of "cooling out" involves convincing the mark that "he" has "compromised himself, in his

own eyes if not in the eyes of others" (Goffman qtd. in Davis 24). As Davis notes, "cooling out" within the context of contingency has "no single moment of hot rejection, only a slow cooling out of ambition" (26). Contingent faculty have access to the "alternate achievement" of being informally called professor or faculty within the context of contingent academic labor, even though they may have little benefits or status (26). They disengage gradually through "extended postdocs, multiple one- and two-year visiting scholar jobs, or repeated years of freeway-flyer teaching assignments" (26). The working conditions of contingent academic labor also create a sense of "objective denial," in the sense that over time they end up with weaker CVs than their tenure-track colleagues (26). "Agents of consolation," in the form of "tenure-track faculty members [and] administrative colleagues" help to "cool out" contingent faculty by "kindly suggest[ing] that they redefine success or look for different goals" (27). Davis suggests that administrators are particularly important in this process of "cooling out," or "ambition management" (28). Successful "cooling out" of contingent faculty impedes "feelings of hot rejection and resentment" that have the potential to "transform into fuel for mobilization, union activity, and media publicity" (28). Davis concludes this section by urging administrators to consult his Contingent Labor Conditions Score to move from the culture of sly "cooling out" to an ethical culture that benefits contingent faculty and students alike (28).

"Part Two: Illustrating the Range of Work Conditions"

The next section, "Illustrating the Range of Work Conditions," has three chapters that focus on, respectively, *material equity*, *professional equity*, and *social equity*. This chapter discusses many of the most common problems that affect contingent faculty.

Material Equity

Material equity focuses on "pay parity," "job security," and "benefits." Davis recommends that full-time contingent faculty receive 75% of what an assistant professor makes because an assistant professor has research duties unrequired of contingent faculty (32). Davis does not really address pay parity for long-term contingents who have worked as long as associate or full professors, so his recommendation still has problems that need addressing. *Job security* challenges are more intricate than the pay parity section. Problems with job security include rehire rights, consistency of assignment, breaks in service, cancellation compensation, and grievance processes (Davis 36-39). Material equity includes health and retirement benefits, which are quite rare in most part-time contingent positions. Davis recommends the Vancouver Community College System as a model for material equity (44-45) (for further reading, see Cosco and Longmate; see also Cosco).

Professional Equity

Professional equity includes access to professional development, opportunities for advancement, and academic freedom (Davis 47-52). Davis also notes the challenges that faculty have to their identities as instructors, when they have to take on part-time work to supplement their meager income as contingent faculty (52-54).

Social Equity

Social equity emphasizes the importance of diversity on the faculty, by both race and gender. Equitable gender ratios should be close to 50/50 (Davis 61). Davis recommends that racial diversity should be consistent across contingent, tenure-track, and tenured ranks (61). Further, racial diversity should correspond to "three sources: rates of diversity among the student population, in the country, and in the state" (Davis 61).

"Part Three: The Contingent Labor Conditions Score"

This final part of the book puts the information in the previous part into rubric form. The publisher's website, Stylus Publishers, LLC., has a PDF version of the Contingent Labor Blank Scorecards, as well as Excel Contingent Labor Conditions Scorecard Worksheets (see "Contingent Academic Labor"). Davis frames these scorecards as primarily for administrators to gauge how they need to change the culture of the campus to improve contingent academic labor conditions, but activists on campus could also use the scorecards to critique administrative practices. I will leave it to the readers to investigate how their campuses measure in these rubrics.

The Value of Davis's Monograph

Davis's *Contingent Academic Labor: Evaluating Conditions to Improve Student Outcomes* is a valuable resource for higher education professionals interested in improving working conditions for contingent faculty. It compares favorably to Marc Bousquet's stringent critique *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. In particular, Davis's section on the "cooling out" of contingent faculty reminded me of Bousquet's condemnation of graduate programs for rendering graduate students as "the waste products of graduate education" (21). "Cooling out" helps explain why it is so difficult to see "products of graduate education" as the leftover "waste" of systemic exploitation. Davis's book is particularly valuable because it adds to its scholarly explication a rubric that puts contingency in qualitative terms. Administrators and Boards of Regents can view their schools' performance through the lens of qualitative spreadsheets and use the results as a guide for changing the culture of exploitation on their campuses.

del Rosso's *Confessions of an Accidental Professor*

Upon reading Lisa del Rosso's title *Confessions of an Accidental Professor*, readers interested in issues related to contingent academic labor may recall the anonymously authored book by Professor X, *In the Basement of the Ivory Tower: Confessions of an Accidental Academic* (2011), which also exposes the working conditions of adjuncts. Interestingly, both del Rosso and Professor X frame their subsistence level teaching careers as "accidental." Professor X (MFA in Creative Writing) taught first-year composition classes in addition to his regular job to supplement his income to help pay for an expensive house (xiii); to use Davis's terms, Professor X fits Frame A's "Specialist" contingent academic laborer category. del Rosso's does not neatly fit into any of the four categories Davis describes (i.e., "Career Enders," "Specialists," "Freelancers," and "Aspiring Academics"), though she exemplifies Frame B, "contingency as exploitation." del Rosso calls attention to the limitations of those categories because she wants to teach full-time with benefits, but a tenure-track research position is not necessarily her goal; rather, she would like a livable wage with benefits (38 and 182-187). Unlike Professor X, who received training in graduate school to teach first-year composition, del Rosso initially learned to teach on the job. She started out as a performer and earned a post-graduate certificate in theatre from the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), but her performance career was cut short after she was diagnosed with epilepsy (del Rosso 14). She earned a BA in Creative Writing from Empire State College (116) and worked in the Writing Center (16); later, she earned an MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University-Florham Campus ("Lisa del Ross," *LinkedIn*). Interestingly, her teaching career began before she finished her bachelor's degree (del Rosso 13). del Rosso discusses aspects of her personal life, in addition to her life as an "accidental professor," but I will focus only on her experiences as a contingent academic laborer.

Teaching at a For-Profit College

Her career as a contingent academic laborer began "accidentally" when she met a faculty member at the for-profit school Berkeley College, and he recommended her to his department chair (del Rosso 17). Although she had not yet completed her BA when she began teaching, she was hired to teach first-year composition, based on her completion of the LAMDA degree (unaccredited) (17-18). del Rosso succinctly describes her training before teaching her first class in 2004:

We sat down in his office, and [the department chair] began explaining the course: Writing. He showed me the book, *Grassroots With [sic] Readings*. He told me there would probably be a lot of students but not to be alarmed. He told me a few of the problems that could come up, mentioned controlling

the class, discipline and what the college would not tolerate with regard to student behavior. He asked very few questions. I asked fewer, due to shock. ... After I ... had the book in hand, [the department chair] showed me around the college: classrooms, copy center, administrative offices, lounge. (17-18)

With that "training" out of the way, she began her career as an adjunct writing instructor. del Rosso taught three years at Berkeley College (35) and left because students lacked the preparation to perform as well as expected. She notes, "The difficulties outweighed the good: missed work, missed deadlines, and too many absences. It was exhausting chasing down so many students for their papers. Frustrated, I didn't know how to change it. I walked around in a state of perpetual annoyance" (35).

Teaching at a Private, Non-Profit Research University

In 2008, del Rosso began teaching at New York University (NYU), and as of 2018, according to her *LinkedIn* account, she still teaches there ("Lisa del Rosso"). The opportunity to teach at NYU arose as "accidentally" as the opportunity to teach at Berkeley College. A friend of a friend mentioned del Rosso to a chairperson at NYU, and they met for brunch (127). The interview with the chair consisted of a conversation about "teaching style, literature, classes, authors [del Rosso] liked (128). The chairperson sought to replace "two other professors ... 'because I did not hand-pick them, and things don't go well when I do not hand-pick my people'" (128). After an interview with an associate dean, she began working for NYU as an adjunct professor (128). del Rosso noted the difference in Berkeley College, a for-profit college, and NYU, a private nonprofit research university. Berkeley College largely serves "Black and Hispanic inner-city students, very few white students, and approximately 2% foreign students. The median age [is] about 24 years old" (del Rosso 18). Tuition in 2007 was approximately \$14,000 and rose to 24,000 in 2017 (18). The students at NYU contrasted greatly with her previous experience: "students were mostly white, privileged, went to private or charter schools, had tutors, and every advantage one could think of" (37). Rather than "chase down students for their papers" at Berkeley, NYU students "were rarely absent, made all deadlines, completed all homework, asked for help, asked to do additional drafts, and complained when they got a B+ instead of an A-" (37-38). del Rosso describes the differences non-judgmentally and notes how "economics and coming from a culture of education" influence students' performance in school (42).

Teaching at a State University

In 2011, she added the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) to her teaching load, though NYU was the most important to her because the

private university paid more than FIT (del Rosso 35). At FIT, she experienced more troubled students than NYU, much like her experience at Berkeley College. Students were coming to her for advice for their personal problems; del Rosso lists fifteen different examples in one chapter and alludes to fourteen additional young women who shared with her that they had experienced some form of sexual assault (51-55). She heard so many problems that she "fe[lt] like a priest without the benefit of heavenly guidance" (51). She notes that her chair told her, "[']you can't be doing this, it's too much['] ... but he didn't tell how to handle it all, or what to do about it, and I was already in the middle of it" (53). del Rosso then describes two examples in detail of helping students who were dealing with sexual assault (56-62). del Rosso's echoes a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on a similar topic, Myra Green's "Thanks for Listening." Green notes the frequency with which students came to her in tears to discuss their problems, and that women often "tak[e] on this kind of care-work at colleges and universities" (par. 10). Green also notes the sense of responsibility that she feels for students, which echoes del Rosso's descriptions:

Often, however, this kind of care-work turns into a lot more than just one conversation. After the person tells the story, cries, and we talk through the issue, there can be much follow-up work to do: Find resources; talk to the department chair, consult counseling services, or visit another administrator or campus office; have a second meeting (or third) to follow up and provide new information; perhaps attend a meeting with an administrator or campus office with the person or on his/her behalf. (par. 13)

del Rosso's experience is more harrowing, though, because the stress of teaching sixty students and helping so many in need took its toll on her physically: she lost 15 pounds and her hair began to fall out (62). Fortunately, through the NYU health centers, she found a therapist that offered professors six sessions free, and that helped her (62). Bitterly, she notes that FIT actually offered free counseling through an Employee Assistance Program, though no one shared this with her until much later than she originally needed the assistance (63).

del Rosso's time at FIT ended after she had a disagreement with a tenured professor/assistant chair. del Rosso was offered a creative non-fiction writing class that she was highly qualified to teach; however, the tenured professor/assistant chair attempted to micromanage the class and wanted to oversee the syllabus, textbook, and content of the class (94-99). del Rosso was rightly offended at the attempt to stifle her academic freedom and was supported by the chair of the department (100-101). A year later, the chair stepped down and the assistant chair "assumed programming responsibilities" (101). The assistant chair dispensed with del Rosso's services, and she no longer had classes to teach at FIT (101-

102). del Rosso did not note this point, but as I read about her arbitrary dismissal, I was reminded of the circumstances that led to her being hired at NYU—i.e., the department only wanted to work with adjuncts she had chosen personally. Arbitrariness led to her teaching at NYU and arbitrariness led to her non-renewal at FIT.

The Value of del Rosso's Memoir

I have focused primarily on del Rosso's experience as a contingent academic laborer, though she writes eloquently about her personal life and parallel professional life as a freelance writer as well. The focus of this review does not allow me to describe more deeply other equally compelling parts of her memoir. Scholarship on contingent academic labor is rightly contextualized in qualitative research that shows the extent of higher education's reliance on contingent academic labor; however, her story is important to read because it shows a complete human being living under the constraints of an adjunct's salary.

Throughout the memoir, del Rosso shows her value as an instructor, and not simply through the course evaluation quotations that serve as the epigraphs of each chapter. In the middle of the book she alludes to the mental cost of the stress of caring for her students; however, her second and final chapters frame a dramatic and important question for readers to consider: "If You Change a Student's Life, Is It Worth It?" Her answer is telling: "Of course it is. But there's a caveat: Of course it is, but not for the long term. Because in the long term, I can't afford it, emotionally or financially" (182). Currently, she is only able to afford to teach as a contingent academic laborer because she shares an apartment with her ex-husband in a rent-controlled apartment (del Rosso 184-185)—she has written about this arrangement in more detail in a *Modern Love* series essay in the *New York Times*. Both del Rosso and Davis remark that someone in the service industry is paid more than an adjunct. del Rosso's roommate is a waiter (12); Davis alludes to an anecdote about an adjunct who earns more as a bartender (33). del Rosso is open about the salaries she receives for adjunct teaching. When she worked at FIT, she received "roughly \$2500" per course (del Rosso 86). At NYU, she earns "roughly \$5760" per course (85), for an annual salary of \$23,040" (184). When she worked at both places, she generally taught two semesters per course at each institution (85). Both places fall far short of the "MLA Recommendation on Minimum Per-Course Compensation for Part-Time Faculty Members": "\$10,700 for a standard 3-credit-hour semester course" (par. 2). She ends the book in true precariat fashion: she earned \$350 more in 2015; this pushed her into a higher tax bracket and caused her to lose Obamacare subsidies, which gave her a tax bill of more than \$2000 (182)—for more on the precariat, see Daniel's "Freshman Composition as a Precariat Enterprise." As of this writing, she is still teaching at NYU, but the fact that she has published her confessions suggests that she is not "cooling out."

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